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Expo pulls the crowds but not the cash

Organisers are hailing Switzerland's national exhibition, Expo.02, as a popular success at its halfway point, but the tills are far from bursting.

Over 20 per cent of tickets sold by Expo.02 are cheaper evening ones. Expo's director Nelly Wenger said the number of visitors was about to reach 4.5 million, slightly more than 42 per cent of the final target organisers have set for the exhibition.

"It's a popular success because of the feedback we are getting both from visitors, the media and opinion polls," said Wenger. "The Swiss are proud of this national project."

Ticket sales have been successful so far, with 2.92 million sold (some allow multiple visits), which accounts for around 68 per cent of the planned total. But actual revenue for these sales is way below what was expected, at just under SFr153 million, nearly SFr19 million off the mark.

Expo management points to two factors that have influenced the bottom line.

Early sales of tickets at discounted rates were far beyond expectations, two million sold instead of just one; and low-cost evening tickets represent more than 20 per cent of all sales.

"In both cases, we are the victims of our own success," said Wenger. "We aren't about to increase the price of evening tickets though to make ends meet."

The ticketing shortfall is just part of the financial dilemma faced by the organisers. At the halfway point, losses are mounting, reaching SFr348 million, and leaving Expo with just SFr130 million from a federal credit to play with.

"It is neither a financial success, nor a catastrophe so far," said Wenger. "The coming months will be decisive and we will have to wait until the last day to see the result."

According to Walter Häusermann, head of Expo finance, money will be tight until the end of the exhibition. "Costs are being kept under control, but we need more revenue," he added.

The organisers are already budgeting losses of SFr60 million on tickets, SFr20 million on parking fees,

and SFr20 million in other sectors. Cost overruns are also expected to reach SFr30 million.

Should Expo cost any more than this, management will be heading back to parliament with its begging bowl for further credits. The organisers are hedging their bets for the time being though, refusing to say whether this will be the case.

However, they have set up a task force to keep an eye on the situation, and a renewed marketing drive is already under way to attract more visitors. Management hopes this will be enough to reach the target of 10.5 million visitors.

"If the weather is favourable in the last few weeks, this goal is realistic," said Rainer Müller, head of marketing, drawing comparisons with recent exhibitions in Hanover and Lisbon. "Expo can expect between 8.4 and 11 million visitors."

The organisers were hoping, indeed expecting, to attract a substantial number of visitors from abroad. But so far foreign marketing campaigns - heavily geared towards neighbouring countries - have failed to woo the tourists.

Management say much of the shortfall is due to the unfavourable climate for tourism in general in Switzerland, pointing the strong franc and the introduction of the euro as just some of the reasons.

"We have to make extra efforts to attract foreigners to Expo.02," Müller told swissinfo.

"But we think the product is marketable abroad, because Expo doesn't

just refer to Swiss issues."

Müller adds that the national exhibition goes beyond the usual Swiss cliches, a vital element in key markets such as France, Germany, Italy and Britain. "You have to show another image of the country there, like we do here at Expo."

Organisers are still aiming for their ambitious goal of one million foreign visitors, including 740,000 from France and Germany. But they are also looking at new marketing strategies.

One is to tailor the message more specifically. "We can sell Neuchâtel individually to the French, for example, because the town is known to them and there is a high-speed train link to France," said Tony Burgener, head of communication for Expo.

"Visitors can find out about the rest of Expo when they get here."

The exhibition is spread over four so called arteplages, platforms on the lakes of Biel, Neuchâtel and Murten in Western Switzerland.

Expo management is also talking to the French and German railways, as well as tour operators, trying to set up special deals for foreign visitors. Special days for France and Germany are also in the works.

Expo.02, which opened in mid-May, closes on October 20."

source swissinfo.org

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